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Interview with Pat and Sandy Crowe

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Pat Crowe

Sandy Crowe

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Event: Interview with Pat and Sandy Crowe 1/31/2012, 3:30 PM

Place: The Woodward Convention Center, Mount Vernon, OH

Duration: 31:22

PC: Well we know Howard well, he performed at the Woodward when it was closed.

L: Oh yeah? He plays the guitar or the banjo or something?

PC: I think it was the banjo. I've got a videotape of it. So how can I help you?

L: Well he gave me your name as a good resource to talk about the Woodward. I'm not from here and it's been such a long time since the Woodward has been hopping, so—

PC: Sandy, you should probably come here. Bring your chair and come on in and sit down. Sandy probably has just has much information on certain elements of the Woodward as I do.

Sandy joins the interview

PC: I guess before we get started I'd like to ask a few questions. What are you looking for when you talk about the Woodward Opera House? What is your question?

LL: Well, since it's being restored, we're trying to look at the history of the place: what people did there. Where in Knox County do people go to be around each other and we chose the Woodward as one of these kinds of places. So it's me trying to get a picture of what that was like.

PC: We had an intern here from Kenyon College a few summers ago who dug up information on the Woodward. Starting around 1851 and carrying it through up until the early 20th century. We took slices of it, you couldn't do all that in three months. We were interested in getting a picture of certain time periods because of the transition within the theater. When the theater was built originally it was built on the fourth floor and during the first few years it was really just a big room. It was used for lectures, meetings. Then it transitioned within about six years into what I would call a fully operational theater and still it was relatively small not as large as it is today and then in the 1870s it, because of the demand, it was just about doubled in size, maybe tripled, it was a large expansion, and they created a horseshoe balcony and moved the stage down a floor. The capacity of the Hall at that time was much larger at that time and that was because of the popularity of theatre. And when you talk about public space I think the opera house days, initially they called

them halls, not opera houses, opera house was a term that came from, um, to make it sound nicer.

SC: More elegant

PC: More elegant, and in order to make it sound more New Yorkish, and it sounded more like a theater than hall. A hall sounds more like a place where you went to do things. IN order to grasp, I think the hardest thing to do in order to grasp what it meant to the people who lived here, you have to have grasp of what their life was like. You know, it was a hard life. You worked long hours, most jobs were manual labor, in a sense, and there was no TV, there was no radio. So, what did you do in the evenings? I mean really, what did you do?

Phone Rings

PC: I need to get this.

Tape paused.

PC: In order to understand, you have to get yourself into what life was really like. Most jobs were manual labor, people would work all day, and where did you go for entertainment? Where did you go to learn things, to hear lectures on lightning and electricity, and all the, during the industrial revolution, all the things taking place that people wanted to learn about so, where did you go to learn? Where did you go to participate in public discourse? Because the opera house has a long history of having presidential candidates, presentations by people who are famous, like Lillian Bloomer. Is that right?

SC: I think she did something upstairs. I think she also may have printed her newspaper, her magazine, in the building.

PC: The Lily

SC: The Lily. Victoria Woodhall, if you've heard of her. She was the first woman to run for president of the United States. She's from the Knox County, Licking County area, but she also did a presentation up in the Woodward.

PC: So it was a place where people did those sort of things. Today we go to the theater to see *Hamlet* or *The King and I*, or whatever, and we're there purely for that entertainment. Theaters are used exclusively for that type of thing. In 1850, 1860, 1870, these spaces were truly multipurpose, they were used for everything. There was even a period of time when there were a group of cadets who were drilling in some sort of local militia exercise and they used the Opera House to do their drills in. It was between two periods of time when the theater was being remodeled so they used it to that. They used it as a roller skating rink for a period of time. When they quit using the upstairs and balcony, they played horseshoes in the winter.

SC: They used it to store merchandise before it was sold.

PC: Well that was after they quit using it as a theater. All of those things are apart of the history of the Opera House building, but really to summarize all of that, it was used as a theater, as a place of public discourse. And it was different in those days. Some of the behavior you see today where we think people misbehave was probably not as uncommon thing in those days. I mean, there were people in the audience who would bring tomatoes and stuff to throw at people if their performance wasn't good.

LL: It's like a cartoon.

SC: The comments in the newspaper were even funnier. They were not very nice.

PC: We'd send them on their way and not let them come back. And there were a lot of other activities going on in the back of the building too, things went on under the bleachers, things we won't even talk about, **it was just a place where the community came together, and all the things that were good and bad about the community would take place there. It's so much different than today. Today, we live a very structured life, if you want to go to the theater, you buy a ticket, you reservations, you go out to dinner, but none of those things were possible.** I mean, think of the facility as large as this that would have a thousand people attended and there's only one toilet in the whole building.

LL: That would definitely be an issue

Laughter

PC: And I'm not trying to digress from this but it was just a different time. We can't even comprehend it because we didn't live it.

SC: Well at that time they didn't have any facilities in the 1800s.

PC: Another part of it was the outhouse. So, anyway, so all of these things taken into account, one would have to talk about that. We were never a mainstay for big artists. I mean, this was a frontier town in the 19th century. So you would get some acts that were traveling. So anyway, that's our perspective. I dunno if Craig Marshall would have time to chat but—we had a consultant in New York City who was an historic architect, and he really truly grasps what went on in theaters like that. What I should do is drudge out his interview tape and give you a copy of that. It might take me a couple of days. I dunno if I have it. So what else? We talked about what it was, from my understanding what it was—

SC: Well from the standpoint of some of the things that took place there, President McKinley used to drive through to campaign. He had, I dunno what you would call it, a meeting up in the woodward—

PC: A "public discourse"

SC: Yes, a public discourse. Local people performed there. Howard Sacks would even tell you about the Snowdens, who would play to raise money to pay for their farm.

PC: So this is a pre-Civil War family getting up on stage of the main theater of the main theater in town. Mt. Vernon was heavily criticized by the newspapers in town.

SC: So that took place up here. Also the local Elks Club, they would have minstrels there. And they did that up until the 1920s, where they would have their minstrels. Now do you know what a minstrel is?

LL: Yes, I took a class—

SC: So you know. Well it's a precursor to today's "Tonight Show."

LL: Oh yeah, and SNL and all that stuff.

SC: So the things that we have today that get a little carried away, they were doing those types of things then.

PC: I wonder if a hundred years from now they'll think the same thing that we think.

LL: We're also trying to get a sense of what the audience was like, too. I guess that's a little more difficult to document.

PC: Oh it wasn't difficult to document at all. There was a guy that owned the harness shop, the guy that owned the livery stable, the guy that owned the grocery store, the guy that chopped wood for a living, the farmers.

LL: So everyone

PC: Yeah, exactly.

SC: Everyone attended. And they did have it, I guess you would call it segregated; there really wasn't a word for it back then.

PC: It was segregated by price, pretty much.

SC: Right, they had the box seats and they had the, I forgot—

PC: The parket circle.

SC: They had about three or four different areas and then they had what I call the bleacher area.

PC: It was a lot like going to Broadway today, better seats cost more. And we don't have a grasp of whether segregation was strictly by price. I don't know what the African American population experienced. But yeah, it was everyone, the farmer, the tailor, and everything that was made was manufactured here, you didn't buy things like we do today. We buy cars from Detroit and computers from China. What

you had here were the people who produced the goods. It was everybody that went to The Woodward.

SC: This was also the edge of the frontier, I mean this was the beginning of the frontier, there was nothing west.

PC: In a lot of ways, we aren't going to do anything different than when they built the building in 1851. Our primary purpose is entertainment, it's public discourse, and it's a way to edify people to educate people. All those three main purposes, the original intent of the building, are still there. It will not be any different than that. Certainly the art forms will be different but the purposes will not change at all. There will be a merchant aspect to it, there will be food served here and all the things that they did in the 1800s will be the same here. There will be more than one bathroom though.

LL: Yeah that would be nice.

PC: But all kidding aside, when Ebenezer Woodward decided to build, he saw that there's, well I can't really get into his head, but it appears that he had a vision in mind to sustain a theater you had to have retail businesses in it. If the theater didn't make money, you still had rent being paid to sustain it. It won't be any different than that.

LL: The Shoppe at the Woodward

PC: Yep, and the Place at the Woodward will eventually move upstairs. There will be food and retail on the first floor. The second floor will be offices, and what isn't performance space will also be offices. We bought the building next door to provide access to the side of the stage. The process doesn't change, the methodology doesn't change, we're here to provide as much commerce on the first floor as we can, the offices. In fact, we'll be doing conference meetings and educational programs right in this facility. In a similar vain to wait Ebenezer Woodward did.

LL: Amazing, well thank you all.